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Essay

Harlem Renaissance

For all its failings, the Harlem Renaissance, originally called the "Negro Renaissance," was a spectacular success—spectacular because it was, in fact, a spectacle, a public exhibition of African American poetry, prose, drama, art, and music. This was not just "art for art's sake," but art to redraw the public image of "colored" people in America. Enjoying a "double audience" of black and white, the Harlem Renaissance was the fairest fruit of the [New Negro Movement](#), whose mission was to bring about racial renewal through cultural diplomacy. The Harlem Renaissance was not only a golden age of African American arts, but a valiant effort to remove the masks of racial stereotypes in order to put a new face on African Americans. To a certain degree, it not only improved race relations somewhat (a nearly impossible task, given the entrenched racial prejudices of the day), but instilled a racial pride and nobility among African Americans whose lives the Harlem Renaissance touched.

The chief strategist and "voice" of this cultural movement was philosopher [Alain Locke](#), who edited the premier and pivotal anthology of the Harlem Renaissance, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), which is described later. As the first African American Rhodes Scholar in 1907, Locke studied abroad at Oxford University (1907–1910), the University of Berlin, and the College de France (1910–1911), before receiving his PhD in philosophy from Harvard University in 1918. Locke figures prominently in the Harlem Renaissance and served as its principal art critic, promoter, and power broker.

One can say that Alain Locke further democratized American democracy in paving the way for the [civil rights movement](#). During the [Jim Crow](#) era, when civil rights were white rights (under *Plessy v. Ferguson's* "separate-but-equal" doctrine), Locke was the real genius behind the Harlem Renaissance, which David Levering Lewis (Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of [W. E. B. Du Bois](#)) aptly characterized as a movement that sought to achieve "Civil Rights by Copyright." As the acknowledged dean of the Harlem Renaissance, Locke may well be regarded as the [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) of African American culture. Locke's anthology, *The New Negro*, has been hailed as the first national book of African Americans. He ingeniously used culture as a strategy for ameliorating racism and for winning the respect of powerful white elites as potential agents for social and political transformation.

The arc of the rise and fall of the Harlem Renaissance is imprecise. Coexisting with [the Jazz Age](#), the Harlem Renaissance was made possible in part by powerful social forces that effected sweeping changes in America at this time, beginning with the end of [World War I](#) in 1918. Foremost among these forces was the [Great Migration](#), a massive exodus of an estimated 13 million African Americans from the rural South to the urban North in the period between 1910 and 1930. These shifts in American demography resulted in the rise of a black middle class in major American cities, particularly in the Northeast. In the midst of this status revolution, one place stood out in particular: [Harlem](#). With this sudden influx of blacks and capital, Harlem became the capital of black America.

Harlem is a large sector of upper Manhattan in [New York City](#). What was taking place in Harlem was the formation of a distinct racial consciousness. Locke characterized this psychic event in that "American Negroes have been a race more in name than in fact" or "more in sentiment than in experience," reflecting a "common condition rather than a common consciousness." In response to this "problem in common rather than a life in common," the Harlem Renaissance offered African Americans their "first chances for group expression and self-determination." The Harlem Renaissance succeeded in the first objective, but failed in the latter.

Parties played a major role both in Harlem night life and in the Renaissance itself, whose official inaugural began with a formal banquet. On March 21, 1924, *Opportunity* editor and sociologist [Charles S. Johnson](#) had invited a group of young writers and artists to a dinner party of the Writers Guild held in the Civic Club, a restaurant at 14 West 12th Street near Fifth Avenue in Harlem. The Civic Club was the only upper-crust New York [nightclub](#) free of color or sex restrictions. The party was called to celebrate [Jessie Redmon Fauset's](#) first novel, *There is Confusion*, and to recognize a newer school of

writers that included Eric Walrond, [Countee Cullen](#), [Langston Hughes](#), and [Gwendolyn Bennett](#).

Evidence suggests that it was Alain Locke himself who originally used the term "Renaissance" to characterize the Harlem cultural movement. In 1928, Locke revealed that, during 1924–1925, "the present writer [Locke] articulated these trends as a movement toward racial self-expression and cultural autonomy, styling it as the New Negro movement." Published in 1925, *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro* was an instant success. It sold an estimated 42,000 copies in two printings.

Capitalizing on this success, Locke expanded the special issue and recast it as an anthology in book form. *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925) was the inaugural and the epochal centerpiece of the New Negro movement. *The New Negro* featured 34 contributors, 4 of whom were white. The volume showcased most of the stellar figures of the Harlem Renaissance who went on to pursue independent literary and artistic careers in their own right. W. E. B. Du Bois contributed the final essay. Locke proclaimed *The New Negro* to be "our spiritual Declaration of Independence."

The prime movers of the Harlem Renaissance believed that art held more promise than politics in bringing about a sea change in American race relations. Although their philosophies of art had shades of differences, their overlap intensified their commonality. As the chief proponent of the "[talented tenth](#)," Du Bois was staunch in his conviction that art should serve the interests of the race. In "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926), Du Bois bluntly demands that art should be used explicitly for propaganda. In Locke's view, the problem with propaganda is that it "harangues, cajoles, threatens, or supplicates," and operates from a defensive posture. In his classic essay, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," in *The New Negro*, Locke proclaims what the function of art must be: "Art must discover and reveal the beauty which prejudice and caricature have overlaid. And all vital art discovers beauty and opens our eyes to that which previously we could not see." Although it was true that the Harlem Renaissance enjoyed a double audience, the primary audience was white. Locke wrote that in its purest form, beauty will be the vehicle of truth: "After Beauty, let Truth come into the Renaissance picture."

In 1926, Langston Hughes published his manifesto, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in *The Nation*, which was cited as a sacred text by the [Black Arts Movement](#) of the 1960s. Hughes takes a diffident, almost devil-may-care approach: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too." Locke praised the essay as a "declaration of cultural independence." In his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1931), editor [James Weldon Johnson](#) wrote that each people is judged by the standard of its own culture. In his November 1928 *Harper's* magazine essay, "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist," Johnson argues that, while racism was being fought on educational, economic, political and sociological fronts, it is the African American artist who was charged with undermining racial prejudice. Johnson's philosophy of art agrees with and synthesizes those of Du Bois and Locke in that producing great black art is a key to gaining a reciprocity of respect.

Art is a surplus of creative energy. Art requires support. Thus much of the creative work of black artists and writers was dependent on white patrons and persons of influence, who were key protagonists of the Harlem Renaissance. This is a remarkable fact. Legally barred from congregating socially, it was practically illegal for blacks and whites to have social relationships beyond the most impersonal kinds of interactions. Still, white patrons played a key role in publishing for and marketing black arts to white consumers for their mutual enrichment. [Carl Van Vechten](#) was probably the pivotal white promoter of the Harlem Renaissance. In 1926, he published *Nigger Heaven*, a controversial novel about black life in Harlem. Van Vechten was often excoriated for the title. *Nigger Heaven* was partly a collaborative black-white effort: James Weldon Johnson and [Walter White](#) read the galley proofs, and poet Langston Hughes wrote verses to replace song lyrics that Van Vechten had used without permission, which prompted a lawsuit.

A patron of Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, [Zora Neale Hurston](#), and others, [Charlotte Osgood Mason](#) was a secret benefactor of major Harlem Renaissance artists and writers. She eschewed publicity and forbade the very mention of her name. Instructing her patrons to refer to her affectionately as "Godmother," her purse had strings attached. This fact has jaundiced Harlem Renaissance art in the eyes of its critics, for Mason's obsession with African primitivism had to be satisfied. Nonetheless, Mason's patronage was the lifeblood of some of the key Renaissance figures.

"Negro poets and Negro poetry are two quite different things," Locke wrote in 1926. "Of the one, since Phyllis Wheatley, we have had a century and a half; of the other, since Dunbar, scarcely a generation." The advent of a self-conscious Negro poetry by Negro poets helped cultivate the group consciousness that Locke found to be singularly lacking among African Americans historically yet developing rather suddenly in his generation. As Locke predicted, the Harlem Renaissance poets have entered into the canon of mainstream American literature.

A West Indian and British citizen, [Claude McKay](#) contributed the poem, "White House," to *The New Negro* anthology. Because of its politically sensitive nature, Locke changed the title to "White Houses." In his social protest poem, "To America," McKay personifies the United States as a tiger, racially terrible yet magnificent in its awesome power. McKay's

greatest claim to fame is his military sonnet, "If We Must Die," which appeared in the July issue of *The Liberator* during the Red Summer of 1919, when race riots swept across 25 of the nation's inner cities like a firestorm. The poem, McKay says, "exploded out of me" and is now considered to be the inaugural address of the Harlem Renaissance. This poem took on the power of an anthem: it was reprinted by virtually every leading African American magazine and newspaper. McKay's sonnet surpassed race when Winston Churchill used "If We Must Die" to rally British soldiers in battles against the Nazis in [World War II](#).

Disinclined to identify himself as a black poet, Countee Cullen could not ignore the pain of the black experience. With Keats as his poetic idol, Cullen used white poetic forms, such as the sonnet, to solemnify that angst. Harper and Brothers published his first volume of poems, *Colors*, in 1925, which won the first [Harmon Foundation Award](#) in Literature in 1926. In Harvard Graduate School in 1926, Cullen took a course in versification from Robert Hillyer, who paid tribute to Cullen as the first American poet to publish a poem in rime royal. In 1926, Cullen became assistant editor of *Opportunity* magazine, and began to write a regular column, "The Dark Tower." On April 9, 1928, Cullen married Nina Yolande, daughter of W. E. B. Du Bois, in an event hailed as the social event of the decade. However, the marriage was short-lived.

Acclaimed by many as the poet-laureate of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes was "discovered" in 1924 by poet Vachel Lindsay, who was Hughes's literary idol. Hughes was a busboy at the time and had seized the opportunity to give Lindsay some poems when the latter dined at the Washington, D.C. hotel where Hughes worked. At a formal banquet hosted by *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* (organ of the [National Urban League](#)) to present awards for its annual poetry contest, Langston Hughes won second prize for "The Weary Blues," which became the title of the collection of poems published by Knopf in 1926 on the recommendation of Van Vechten, who personally hand-delivered the manuscript to the publisher and wrote the foreword as well. Locke credits Hughes with bringing about, for the first time, a "revelation of the emotional color of Negro life, and his brilliant discovery of the flow and rhythm of the modern and especially the city Negro, substituting the jazz figure and personality for the older plantation stereotype."

Locke also recognized the contribution of visual artists to the Harlem Renaissance: "The Negro artist thus found his place beside the poets and writers of the 'New Negro' movement, which in the late Twenties and through the Thirties galvanized Negro talent to strong and freshly creative expression." In addition, Harlem Renaissance artists helped develop a visual vocabulary and grammar of images representing African Americans. In the 1925 *Harlem* issue of the *Survey Graphic*, Locke published seven portraits of Harlem folk, sketched by Winold Reiss. Son of Fritz Reiss, a landscape painter, Winold studied under Franz von Stuck of Munich. "Winold Reiss has achieved," Locke claimed, "what amounts to a revealing discovery of the significance, human and artistic, of one of the great dialects of human physiognomy, of some of the little understood but powerful idioms of nature's speech." Locke praised Reiss for achieving, through painting locally in Harlem, a universality of the human experience.

Acknowledged by some as the father of black American visual art, [Aaron Douglas](#) was recognized by Locke as "the pioneer of the African Style among the American Negro artists." In addition to being an illustrator, whose work first appeared in the *Harlem* issue and then in *The New Negro*, Douglas was a muralist, whose work was featured at Club Ebony in New York, in the Sherman Hotel in [Chicago](#), and in [Fisk University](#). In developing his distinctive style, Douglas contributed the illustrations to *God's Trombones* (1927), by James Weldon Johnson, which features cycles of sermon-poems. Douglas drew on Egyptian and African art and was influenced by Cubism, Art Deco, and Art Nouveau as well. These illustrations are considered to be Douglas's finest work.

A bodybuilder as well as a writer, [Jean Toomer](#) was a biracial man, who could pass for white, and ultimately did. In 1923, he published *Cane*, a novel set in Georgia, which Langston Hughes praised as the best prose ever written by an African American, and which Locke hailed as "a brilliant performance." Toomer was a one-book author, whose career was abortive for personal reasons. In spiritual pursuit of the "four-conscinal" and "illuminant" Absolute, Toomer subsequently became a follower of the mystic Gurdjieff and married a wealthy white woman, Margery Latimer. When James Weldon Johnson invited Toomer to contribute to a revised edition of *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1931), Toomer refused, no longer wishing to identify himself as a "Negro."

Born of a Danish mother and a West Indian father, [Nella Larsen](#) won the Harmon Foundation's Bronze Medal for Literature in 1929 for her novel *Quicksand* (1928), which W. E. B. Du Bois acclaimed as comparable in quality to the fictional works of [Charles Chesnutt](#). Although legally black, she had loyalties to both races, a theme of racial fusion and confusion explored in *Quicksand*, in which the main character, Helga Crane, is a full projection of Larsen herself. Locke describes *Quicksand* as a "study of the cultural conflict of mixed ancestry" and hails it as a "truly social document of importance" that illuminates "the problem of divided social loyalties and . . . the conflict of cultures." In 1930, Larsen became the first black woman to win a Guggenheim Fellowship.

There are more than 130 published plays by 37 Harlem Renaissance authors. On May 22, 1921, *Shuffle Along* opened at Broadway's David Belasco Theater. With lyrics written by [Noble Sissle](#) and music by [Eubie Blake](#), *Shuffle Along* became the first musical revue scored and performed by African Americans. It launched the careers of [Josephine Baker](#) and Florence Mills. In addition, Locke categorized three American plays as "outstanding": Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, Paul Green's Pulitzer Prize-winning *In Abraham's Bosom*, and DuBose Heyward's Charleston folk-drama, *Porgy*.

The year 1929 was a big one for Harlem renaissance drama: the Negro Experimental Theatre was founded in February, the Negro Art Theatre was formed in June, and the National Colored Players was created in September. That same year, [Wallace Thurman](#) collaborated with white journalist and playwright William Jourdan Rapp to write a murder melodrama, *Harlem*. Produced with an all-black cast (except for a white police officer), the Broadway performances of *Harlem* proved a significant milestone in the development of black drama. It opened at the [Apollo Theater](#) on Broadway and was a huge success.

The Harlem Renaissance arose during the period of American progressivism, with its faith in the reform of democracy. Ultimately, the Harlem Renaissance crashed along with the stock market in the early years of the Great Depression, and its failure to effect any real social change was dramatically underscored by the [Harlem Riot of 1935](#). Without a unifying ideology, the Renaissance was given over to exoticism and exhibitionism and failed in its stated mission to solve the racial crisis through cultural diplomacy. It was not so much that the Harlem Renaissance failed; rather it was America that failed the Harlem Renaissance. This failed impact was the fate of modernist movements in general, which sought to create a social conscience for the age of modernity. Yet Houston A. Baker sees the publication of Locke's *The New Negro* (1925) as a success in its own right. The Harlem Renaissance created a place in the national literary tradition, officially recognized in the March 13, 2002, "White House Salute to America's Authors" event, which paid tribute to writers of the Harlem Renaissance who created rich art and became agents of social change. The Harlem Renaissance's cultural diplomacy had become a cultural legacy.

Christopher Buck

Further Reading

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